



Rep. Wilson Traveling to Nigeria to Help Free Girls

BY ISMAIL ERCAN

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U.S. Rep. Frederica Wilson announced Sunday that she plans to take her yearlong campaign for the release of almost 300 kidnapped Nigerian schoolgirls to the West African country.

Wilson, D-Miami Gardens, has become the most visible advocate in the United States for the girls' release. They are being held by the Boko Haram terrorist group, which seized them from their school in Chibok in April 2014.

During a community meeting at the Word of Life Bible Church on Sunday, Wilson said she will be among about a half-dozen members of Congress traveling to Nigeria on Thursday for meetings with government officials and family members of the girls.

The Nigeria trip follows a meeting Wilson held last week with recently elected Nigerian President Muhammadu Buhari during his visit to Washington.

"I was really impressed by his tone and his conviction," said Wilson, who publicly criticized previous Nigerian President Goodluck Jonathan for not working aggressively to rescue the girls. "He told me that 'it is at the top of my agenda.'"

She added that Buhari faces a real challenge — determining the real leaders of Boko Haram.

"So many groups have approached him stating that they would like to negotiate with the Nigerian government as the heads of Boko Haram," she said.

The Buhari administration has asked President Barack Obama for additional intelligence funding to help determine the group's leaders. Wilson said that Buhari assured her that "once we do, we will negotiate with them for the release of these girls."

At Sunday's meeting, about 30 local Nigerians were in the audience. Also present were five Mandela Fellows from Africa, part of Obama's Young African Leaders Initiative. They're in Miami as part of a training program at Florida International University.

Also at the meeting were Miami Gardens City Council member Erhabor Ighodaro; Yinka Tella, president of the Nigerian America Foundation (NAF); and the Rev. Ige Kelly Osaigbovo, pastor of Word of Life Bible Church.

Wilson began the meeting by recalling her first trip to Nigeria shortly after the kidnappings. About 300 schoolgirls were captured, but some escaped. Boko Haram, which is fighting an insurgency against the Nigerian government, still holds 219 girls.

During her visit to Nigeria, Wilson met with some of the schoolgirls who escaped as well as the parents of girls who remained in captivity.

“The grief of many was overwhelming,” she said. “I really felt for them.”

Since then, Wilson has pushed for a solution in Washington. She helped pass two resolutions condemning the actions of Boko Haram and a bill funding intelligence to identify the leaders of the group. She tweets regularly using the #BringBackOurGirls hashtag and has helped to organize Democratic and Republican colleagues in Congress to wear red on Wednesdays to bring attention to the issue.

Wilson said she has not lost hope despite the time that has passed since the girls were kidnapped.

“I believe that these girls are in protective custody. ... They are being treated well and are being held because they are very valuable in the bargaining process. Until someone can show me a mass grave, where they have killed all these girls and buried them, I will never give up,” she said. “I believe that they are still alive and I believe that Nigerian President Buhari believes the same thing.”

The Mandela Fellows, who flanked Wilson at the meeting, each carried a #BringBackOurGirls poster. The hashtag was created shortly after the kidnappings and has gained popularity worldwide. She said it was the top trending hashtag worldwide on Twitter two weeks ago.

The issue remains on minds of many people around the world. Perhaps no one knows this better than Aleushima Utsaha, who’s from the province where the kidnappings occurred.

Currently a Mandela fellow taking public management classes at FIU, she attended one of the top medical schools in Nigeria, located 120 miles from Chibok, the village where the schoolgirls were kidnapped.

“It’s really affecting us because now people cannot go to school there with their minds being at unrest. I think it is really a loss for us; you cannot estimate the impact,” she said. “Some of the best education is located in that region and people cannot send their children to those schools because of the insecurities. The impact is immense because education is really the key; it’s the way out.”